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Buckner

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Today



Buckner

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Good things going on

The title of this column in *Buckner Today* is “Perspectives on Buckner.” That’s been its name since before I began writing it.

But as I write this column, I’m reflecting on that word “perspective.” I do have a unique perspective about Buckner. It’s a perspective that allows me to see the big picture, while keeping my finger on the pulse of everyday life.

From my perspective, this is a grand time to be at Buckner. God is opening the floodgates of heaven and pouring blessings on our work. I count you as one of those blessings. What I’m about to share is a direct result of God working in and through you to bless the children, families and senior adults we serve daily.

Last year, for the third year in a row, we **set a new Buckner record for the number of children placed in Buckner foster care, with more than 1,100 children served.** In addition, we placed 158 children in forever homes through adoption.

God has blessed the **“Shining Hope Dallas”** capital campaign with tremendous leadership through our co-chairs, Meredith and Kyle Bebee and Katie and John Golden. These two couples are working tirelessly with our campaign council and staff to push toward our \$14.5 million goal to fund the construction and future endowment of a new Buckner Family Hope Center in the Bachman Lake community.

In February, we received a \$1.12 million grant toward our goal from the **Crystal Charity Ball**, a dedicated group of ladies in Dallas who give of themselves as well as their resources to make Dallas a better place. That gift pushed us well past the half-way point in our campaign and we are aiming toward a late-summer groundbreaking for the new Family Hope Center.

Since we’re in Dallas already, I’ll mention the continued progress on construction of **Ventana by Buckner**, our new senior living community. The two towers are going up and you can almost see it grow by the day. We are on schedule for a 2019 opening and we have already filled nearly 80 percent of the independent living apartment homes.

And speaking of our retirement ministries, we have just finished major additions to our communities in **Beaumont – Calder Woods and Austin – Buckner Villas.** Both of these communities continue growing and serving their individual areas with distinction. We are also moving forward with significant improvements to our retirement communities in **Houston – Parkway Place and San Angelo – Baptist Retirement Community.** These expansions, renovations and improvements keep Buckner at forefront as the

leader in senior living in Texas.

One of the most exciting developments over the past 12-18 months is our **growth and expansion in Houston.** While Buckner has had a presence in Houston for more than 60 years, we have only recently begun expanding our work with children and families.

In just a few weeks, we will be opening a new **Buckner Family Hope Center in Houston** on the campus of the Cornerstone Community in collaboration with Star of Hope Ministries.

And next door to that new Family Hope Center, we are beginning to move in families in conjunction with **New Hope Housing.** They are finishing construction of a new apartment complex at Cornerstone Community and **Buckner will operate our Family Pathways** program there for 20 of the resident families.

In a few weeks, we will be starting renovations at our current Family Pathways facility in Lubbock to make room for a new Family Hope Center, **our first Family Hope Center in West Texas, thanks to the generosity of a local family.**

I could go on about the blessings God is bestowing on this work but let me end by saying that none of this is accidental. We serve a God who knows the end from the beginning. We serve a God who is intentional in all his ways.

At Buckner, we spend extraordinary time planning and being strategic about what we’re doing and where we’re going. Last year, we launched the **Buckner Strategic Plan**, a three-year rolling plan that is our roadmap and guide. That plan is constantly reviewed, updated and implemented.

So, what’s my point? Simply this – as an “investor” in the work of Buckner, you are so much more than a donor. You are a partner who is invested in this work, far beyond dollars. You have honored us with your friendship and you are a co-laborer with us.

It is important to me personally that you see and experience the joys and blessings God is pouring out on Buckner. In fact, you are one of those blessings.

Thank you – for your friendship and for your ongoing trust and support.



Albert L. Reyes, President and CEO
Buckner International

Visit my blog at www.bucknerprez.com

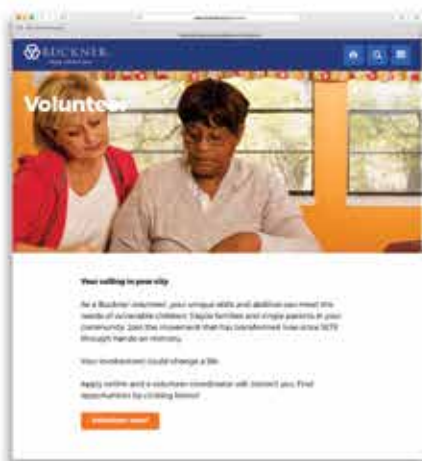
buckner.org



When Buckner Westminster Place resident John Ramsey saw his friend and fellow pastor Cuong Manh Tran in need of a new kidney, he prayed for the Lord to meet Tran's need. He just didn't know how big a part he would play in answering that prayer.

Learn more at buckner.org/BucknerToday

Visit buckner.org/volunteer to find volunteer opportunities in the United States and around the world. Help organize fun activities for foster children, prepare boxes of aid or deliver shoes to vulnerable children around the world!




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IN OTHER WORDS | SCOTT COLLINS

Sustainable

There's a word you probably don't use every day – if ever. But it's a word that keeps popping up around Buckner.

Sustainable. It's defined as "a method of harvesting or using a resource so that the resource is not depleted."

Why is that a word that keeps coming up here? Independence, that's why. It's what everyone wants, but for many families we serve, dependence has become the norm. But if you can create and foster sustainability, you've given the gift of independence.

Families that stand on their own are strong families and become places where children are protected and safe.

What does that look like? In Kenya, where I just spent two weeks, it looks like teaching a widow with five children and two grandchildren how to plant a garden that produces vegetables she both eats and sells for income.

It looks like helping a family in Dallas build their own piñata business to supplement their income so their children are safe and provided for.

Sustainability isn't a word we use every day because it's something we just do naturally. But for many families in poverty and vulnerability, sustaining their family economically has been out of reach.

So why is an organization like Buckner that has built a 139-year reputation for child care teaching families to grow vegetables?

We've learned that economic vulnerability is the leading cause for children being neglected, abused or abandoned. While Buckner is committed to caring for children removed from their homes, we are even more committed to making those homes places where children are never removed.

The key? Teaching families to sustain themselves so children are protected and safe.



Scott Collins is Vice President of Communications at Buckner International.

3

Reasons we're excited at Buckner!

Together, we served a record number of children through foster care and adoption!



The need for foster and adoptive families is as pressing as it has ever been. And you're stepping up to meet the needs of vulnerable children in Texas and beyond like never before.

In 2017, Buckner served a record 1,254 children through foster care and adoption domestically. The record continues a trend of growth in the number of children Buckner has served through foster care and adoption. Last year is the third consecutive year Buckner has served more than 1,000 children through these ministries – the only three years for that to happen in the 139-year history of the organization.

But that's only a glimpse of the growth. Buckner is the leader internationally for in-country foster care and adoption. About 270 children in Kenya entered loving homes through Buckner in 2017.

Thank you for all you do to care for vulnerable children!



Buckner receives \$1.125 million grant!



Buckner Children and Family Services was named as one of eight nonprofit beneficiaries of the 2018 Crystal Charity Ball. The \$1.125 million award will go toward building the children's wing of the proposed Buckner Family Hope Center at Bachman Lake in Dallas.

Albert Reyes, President and CEO of Buckner International, called the award "a monumental



step toward improving the lives of so many vulnerable children and families in this high-need area in the heart of Dallas. We are so grateful to the Crystal Charity Ball and

the 2018 CCB Charity Selection Committee for their vision to answer that need with us."

The Family Hope Center will be located in the center of the Bachman Lake community, just north of Love Field. The area is home to an estimated 82,000 residents, many of whom are at-risk. The teen pregnancy rate of the area is three times the national average and the child removal rate is twice the average of the rest of Dallas County. About 96 percent of students in the area are considered economically disadvantaged.

Buckner was among eight nonprofits that will be the recipients of the 2018 Crystal Charity Ball's \$6,501,105 goal. Other beneficiaries included After-School

All-Stars North Texas; Booker T. Washington High School for the

Performing and Visual Arts; Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Dallas; Friends of the Dallas Public Library; Mosaic Family Services; Nexus Recovery Center; and Ronald McDonald House of Dallas, Inc.



Ventana by Buckner begins reaching for the sky!



Ventana by Buckner, Buckner Retirement Services' newest senior living community, is beginning to take its place in the Dallas skyline. Already, half of the main structural components are

up and the community is growing quickly.

More than 200 crew members work on the construction site daily, adding a floor every nine days and pouring four football fields of concrete each week.

The summer of 2019 will be here soon. Depositors currently are selecting interior finishes and looking forward to BRS' distinctive senior lifestyle. Join us as we look forward to serving seniors in an exciting way.



Texas Rangers Foundation partners with Buckner for new Family Hope Center

The Texas Rangers Baseball Foundation Jan. 17 announced a major partnership with Buckner International designed to strengthen the lives of area youth and their families who utilize the Texas Rangers MLB Youth Academy at Mercy Street Sports Complex presented by Toyota in West Dallas.

The announcement was made by Rangers and Buckner International officials at an event at the Youth Academy. In addition, Rangers pitcher Cole Hamels participated in the official opening of four classrooms in the Youth Academy's Globe Life Indoor Training Center. Supported by The Hamels Foundation, the classrooms will be utilized for a variety of educational programs.

Buckner International will operate a satellite Family Hope Center at the Texas Rangers Baseball Foundation Youth Academy. The goal is to provide services to children and families using the youth academy baseball facilities to strengthen families in the community. Buckner is currently working with the Texas Rangers Baseball Foundation and other partners to assess the community to determine which services are needed.

Buckner currently operates 26 Family Hope Centers in Texas and six other countries. These centers are community-based places of hope where families go to find strength and empowerment to reach their God-given potential. Services typically range from a variety of community events designed to engage families, including parent education classes, job skills training, financial empowerment, family coaching, counseling and spiritual enrichment.

The Buckner Family Hope Center strengthens vulnerable families so they become safe places for children to grow and thrive.

"Buckner is grateful to the Texas Rangers Baseball Foundation for the opportunity to work together on behalf of children and families in West Dallas," said Buckner International President/CEO Albert Reyes. "Our goal at Buckner is to protect children by strengthening families and this partnership gives us the perfect opportunity to fulfill that mission.

"Baseball is a great way to attract children and families. The Texas Rangers are to be commended for their foresight and for their sincere desire to have a positive impact on children beyond the playing field."

"The Texas Rangers Foundation is proud to partner with Buckner International on this most worthwhile initiative," said Rangers Vice President of Community Outreach and Foundation Executive Director Karin Morris. "The mission of the Texas Rangers MLB Youth Academy is to enhance the lives of youngsters in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex and North Texas both on and off the playing field. Buckner's resources and reach will be a great asset to these efforts."

The Rangers, Texas Rangers Baseball Foundation, Major League Baseball, the Major League Baseball Players Association and Dallas-based Mercy Street partnered to build the state-of-the-art facility, which provides free or reduced cost and year-round opportunities for North Texas youth, on the 17-acre site at the intersection of Hampton and Bickers.

The Texas Rangers MLB Youth Academy at Mercy Street Sports Complex presented by Toyota, which held its official ribbon-cutting in December after two years of construction, includes five fields



(Oates Field presented by Papa John's, the Clayton Kershaw Challenge Field, Josh "Hambone" Hamilton Field, Field of Dreams and the Mimi's T-Ball Field) and the Globe Life Training Center, an indoor facility which houses Adrian Beltre Field, which is a major league size infield; the Ian Desmond training room; Origin Bank Conference Room, four classrooms supported by the Hamels Foundation; weight room facilities, academy staff offices, and a concession stand.

The Texas Rangers MLB Youth Academy is available to children throughout North Texas, especially the more than 9,000 kids who live within the West Dallas neighborhood and youth from the greater Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex area.

In addition to providing year-round baseball and softball instruction and play, including hosting tournaments, coaching clinics and skills camps, the academy will provide youth with access to tutoring programs, college prep classes, college and career fairs, financial literacy and internship programs, courses teaching math through the use of baseball statistics, and MLB industry alternative career workshops.

Youth also have opportunities to be involved in drug resistance and gang-prevention programs and healthy lifestyle classes. Additionally, all academy members and other community youth benefit from academy facilities and programs through baseball vocational programming, such as umpiring seminars, athletic field management, scouting and player development, sports information training and athletic sports training.

The Texas Rangers Baseball Foundation employs staff to oversee the academy, and works with Mercy Street and their existing programming. The operations of the academy are covered entirely by the Texas Rangers Baseball Foundation, which also will provide equipment, supplies, utilities and other operating costs. **BT**

Rangers Winter Caravan swings by Buckner Longview campus

The Texas Rangers visited Buckner children, families and seniors at the Buckner Family Hope Center in Longview as a part of their Winter Caravan in January, continuing the celebration of Buckner International's new partnership with the club in Dallas.



Excited children and adults filled a Family Hope Center classroom to meet players, take photographs and receive autographs from catcher Robinson Chirinos, pitcher Nick Gardewine, first base coach Steve Buechele and radio personality Jared Sandler.





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A visible change

When the door to apartment 12 opens, I hardly recognize the woman behind it. She's standing in the very same room we first met, but her hair is darker than I remember. Now it hangs just below her shoulders. She stands straighter, her shoulders back and her head high. She extends her hand firmly and welcomes me. With a smile. What a difference 12 months makes, the latest in a journey seven years in the making.

Story by John Hall • Photography by Elizabeth Arnold and John Hall



As a teenager, Marissa Breland struggled more than most. She's bipolar and suffers from depression. That meant significant mood swings that created issues at home.

By her own account, she struggled with anger issues and alcohol. She dropped out of school at 15. Scars inflicted by her own hand still run up and down her left forearm.

One unhealthy lifestyle decision led to another, which led to a five-year unhealthy relationship. From it though came Addisyn, a blessing Breland cherishes.

Breland and Addisyn lived in a recreational vehicle on the edge of Longview. They shared a bed. The small water heater wasn't adequate, forcing Breland to boil water for her daughter to have a warm bath. It was a struggle.

"No one wants to raise their daughter in an RV," Breland said.

As she worked at the cash register of a gas station, Breland fantasized of a different life. A better life – for her and Addy.

"I always dreamed of going to school and getting my [driver's] license. But I didn't see it happening any time soon. I'd been trying to do that for years, and it had been taking forever."



After visiting with Breland for a while, there's a knock at the door and Breland opens it. But Addisyn is the first to greet the new guest, barreling into her knees with a squeal of delight.

It's Tisha Grotemat, a parent educator through Buckner Project HOPES and Breland's half-sister. She's a rock star in Addisyn's eyes. She's the fun aunt with a teenage daughter who treats Addisyn like a sister.

She's also the instrument God used to change Breland and Addisyn's lives.

More than 15 years separate Grotemat and Breland. They share the same father, but truthfully they'd never been close. When Breland was struggling through her teenage years, Grotemat was faced with balancing a desire to help with a need to protect her children. Both sisters understand why the relationship was how it was. But they never stopped caring about each other.

Grotemat saw the potential in Breland and the need to help if possible. When Grotemat became a parent educator, she thought Project HOPES would be ideal for Breland and Addisyn.

Through the program, Grotemat visits with Breland and Addisyn bi-weekly to encourage healthy behavior and bonding between mother and daughter. They do activities that encouraged Addisyn's development.

"I love Project HOPES. It's been really fun for me and Addy. I've

really enjoyed it," Breland said.

"My sister will come to my house and do activities," Breland said. "It's things that my daughter can make. It teaches her skills like listening to instructions. It's stuff that's fun. It's stuff like painting and drawing. And we get to bond."

Along the way, Grotemat and Breland connected like never before. Through hours upon hours of conversation, they invested in each other's lives. They got to know each other like never before.

"I'm extremely proud of her," Grotemat said. "With every semester, her confidence has grown step by step. I can't imagine anything more satisfying than seeing your own sister be successful."



Addy's giggles bounce across the walls of the apartment as she makes shapes with her aunt and mom out of clay, her favorite activity to do during Project HOPES visits. She stops quickly and holds her creation up to me.

"It's a flower," she announces with pride. And before anyone can respond, she's set it on the table and is carefully crafting something new.

As Breland and Grotemat visit happily at the dining table, 100

Tisha Grotemat (left), a parent educator with Project HOPES, saw the potential in Marissa Breland (right) and knew the program would be a perfect fit for her and her daughter, Addisyn. Through the program, Grotemat visits with Breland and Addisyn to encourage healthy behavior and bonding between mother and daughter and do activities that encourage Addisyn's development.



yards away Buckner Family Hope Center Family Coach Courtney Barr is engaged in a much more somber conversation with a single mom who is struggling and looking for help.

In the same chair Breland once sat in.



Like a lot of the vulnerable families who enter Barr's office, Breland came full of potential. She was an amazing mother and a hard worker who was determined to have a better life. She'd already grown tremendously through Project HOPES.

because she felt like Courtney could help me meet a lot of the goals I had like getting my license, getting in school. I'd even thought about getting in counseling about some different things," Breland said. "I met with Courtney, and she helped me do everything I needed to get my license, take my class. She really helped me through everything. She laid out the steps. She pushed me through it."

Barr quickly noted that Breland put in the hard work to make change happen.

"She's just a rock star," Barr said. "It was a really quick 180 with her. I think that's what's so remarkable about her. She had this amazing change in six months."

Breland enrolled in Jobs for Life, a twice-weekly Bible study and job skill development class through the Family Hope Center. There, she found her calling.

"Jobs for Life was huge for me," Breland said. "When I started taking that class, I was requesting off to take it twice a week. It's basically a mini-Bible study about jobs. That's what ultimately led me to want to go to school for social work."

"I always wanted to go to school, but I didn't know what for. That class was so intense: Bible study twice a week and job training skills. It just opened so many doors. That's where I found out about Buckner Family Pathways. It just became more of a reality that I could go to school."



But she was scared to take the next steps.

"There was a lot of fear," Barr said. "She wasn't happy with how things were in her life. But she was afraid to move forward and afraid to take those steps because it can be scary. It can be scary to do something different and possibly fail at it."

Breland helped herself tremendously by knowing exactly what she wanted to do. She needed to learn how to drive, get her license and get a car. Then, she might be able to go to school.

Barr outlined practical steps Breland could take to reach each of those goals and then walked alongside her as she took them. In many ways, Barr said, all Breland needed was another positive voice encouraging her. When self-doubt crept in, Barr and Breland pushed it back out.

"My sister suggested family coaching with Courtney Barr

A stack of textbooks sits in the corner of the room. They're both a sign of all the hard work Breland's already put in and all the work to come.

Breland's in-between semesters at Kilgore College in Longview, where she is working her way toward her associate degree. Although she was nervous heading into her first classes, she's settled in nicely and thrived.

In the classroom. And in her home.

I first met Grotemat and a quieter Breland almost exactly a year ago in this very room as she moved into her Family Pathways apartment. She was speechless as she fought back tears and walked through her new home.

“I love Project HOPES.

It's been really fun for me and Addy. It's things that my daughter can make. It teaches her skills like listening to instructions. It's stuff that's fun. It's stuff like painting and drawing. And we get to bond.” -*Marissa Breland*



Addisyn had her own room. Breland had her own room. It was entirely decorated. And it came with all the hot water they'd ever need.

"It was really exciting and emotional when I moved in because my daughter had been living in a tiny cramped RV," Breland said. "When we moved into our apartment here, it was so big and so beautiful. It was like an opportunity. It was so much more real the day we moved in. It was like this is really happening."

Kimberly Clough, director of the Family Pathways program in Longview, picked up where Barr left off, encouraging Breland along in her journey.

"Marissa was a single mom who had some struggles," Clough said. "We're here to make sure she succeeds."

With Clough's help, Breland continued making great strides. She enrolled in Kilgore College and figured out how to balance motherhood, school and working. Addisyn was accepted into an excellent preschool where she excels in the classroom like her mother.

"Buckner has a support system like none other," Breland said. "If I have trouble with school or I need counseling or I just need someone to talk to, Buckner has been that for me. They have helped me see a way out of where I was. They give me the opportunity to go to school so I can help people like I want to."

Breland is on the path to succeed far beyond what she once dreamed.

"At one point, I was somebody who really needed help," she said. "I want to give that back. I want to pay that forward. I feel like that's really important. Everybody needs help to a certain extent."



As we wrap up the interview, Breland turns reflective. Sitting next to a wooden carving that reads "blessed," tears well up in her eyes as she thinks about the change that's happened in her life in less than two years.

The transformation is visible.

"It means the world that they'd provide this opportunity for me," Breland said. "I'm not sure how I'd do it on my own. It's a lot to have a 4 year old and going to work and going to school. Without Buckner, I don't see me doing this." **BT**

Open home, Open hearts

Story by Aimee Freston

Photography by

Aimee Freston and John Hall



It was the day Jennifer and Mace Perez had prayed for. After four years of infertility, Jennifer and Mace were holding their beautiful, newborn daughter in their hands.

“She was an absolute miracle in every single way,” Jennifer said.

While holding their little girl, tears streamed down Jennifer’s face. The Perezes were in heavenly bliss for exactly 31 hours and 22 minutes, but all their struggles leading up to this day were worth it.

Jennifer and Mace always knew they wanted children. And for Jennifer, adoption always had tugged on her heart even when she was an adolescent.

Jennifer and Mace thought they would have biological children first, then adopt. But after two years of infertility, they felt God was taking them a different direction than they had planned.

They went to their first informational meeting at Buckner International with another plan – to look at domestic infant adoption. But again, God changed their thinking.

“After the meeting, we sat down with a case manager and he asked us if we had ever considered foster care,” Jennifer said. “My initial reaction was there is no way I’m going to ever foster. I can’t do it. I love children too much. I walk in a room, I see a child and there

is an instant love. There is no way I could foster a child and give them back.”

But Jennifer and Mace agreed to pray about it and slowly God changed their perspective. They realized they were being called to foster care.

“The Lord made it so clear to us that we were called to adopt, but we were also called to foster. That was his plan for us,” Jennifer said. “Our perspective

on fostering and adoption changed. We’re not doing this to gain children for our own family. We’re doing this to give our family away to another child or children who need us.”

“We became more and more foster minded,” Mace added. “We began to see ourselves as a foster family first. *[Continued on page 20]*



Jennifer and Mace Perez have been foster parents for two years (above right). During that time, they have provided a home for 10 children. In February 2017, Jennifer and Mace adopted Bernard (at left) from foster care.

Help children
find forever families.





Thanks to families like the Perezes, Buckner International cared for more children through foster care and adoption in 2017 than any other time in its history. Still, the need for strong, healthy families for a season or forever remains immense.

More than 31,000 children in Texas alone are in foster care. Many of these young people have been abandoned or removed from their homes as a result of abuse or neglect.

You can make a difference today. Change a life by empowering Buckner to recruit foster families for the most vulnerable children in our midst.



BUCKNER
Hope shines here.®

GIVE NOW:

\$75

provides a loving home
for a child for two weeks

\$161

provides a loving home
for a child for a month

\$1,956

provides a loving home
for a child for one year

**Please give today
using this
envelope and
change a life.**



And in the event a child needs a forever home, we want to say, "Yes, we will be that home as well."



The Perezes decided to take in emergency placements, meaning they often received a child in the middle of the night who needed to be placed in a home immediately. The child would stay for a short period then be moved to another home.

Saying goodbye was hard, but through it all, Jennifer and Mace learned God was with them even during the challenging times.

"What the Lord kept reminding us is that he doesn't call us to a comfortable life. He calls us to a life of radical obedience," Mace said. "Where we are weak, he is strong. And he gives us everything we need, every time, without fail."

And so it seemed every time Jennifer and Mace became accustomed to their current situation, something else would happen to shake up their lives. And after fostering for seven months, their next surprise came in the form of a 3-year-old boy named Bernard.

Unlike the other foster children Jennifer and Mace had cared for, Bernard needed a forever home. When a kinship care

placement fell through, his case manager asked Jennifer and Mace if they would consider a foster-to-adopt placement.

The next day, energetic Bernard bounced into their home.

"Bernard is a big personality in a little body," Mace said. "He has never met a stranger, and I think he's the most popular person at our church."

Bernard isn't shy to give anyone a high five or fist bump. Recently, he was the ring bearer in a wedding and instead of holding the pillow with the rings, he dribbled his basketball down the aisle and slam-dunked it into the groom's arms.

Seven months later, Bernard was officially adopted into the Perez family.

"From the very beginning, we knew that Bernard's final plan was going to be adoption," said Jennifer. "But after walking out of the courtroom, a whole shift of our heart just went to the idea of when you know this child isn't going to leave and you know you get to spend the rest of your life with him. I mean, literally sometimes, we'll look at each other and we'll say, 'He's not leaving.' We get to watch him grow up. But the excitement you get as a parent to be able to say, 'The Lord has allowed us to have you for a lifetime,' is just unbelievable."



Shortly after Bernard was placed in their home, Jennifer discovered she was pregnant for the first time. Jennifer and Mace were ecstatic.

"I will never forget, it was Aug. 10, which is my birthday, and I was sitting at the kitchen table eating my breakfast," Mace said. "Jennifer walks out of the bedroom with tears in her eye. I turned to her, and with all the joy in her heart said, 'I'm pregnant.' And so we were, of course, overjoyed."

Because they suffered from infertility for so long, they had regular check ups and ultrasounds to check on the baby. With each passing week of good health, Mace and Jennifer began to relax. At their 11-week ultrasound, however, they received a life-shattering diagnosis.

The ultrasound revealed their baby's skull had not developed correctly. Their doctor informed them there was no chance their child would survive.

"I finally released that cautious nature and was fully sold on, like, we get to have a baby," Mace said. "After years of praying and surrendering, this was really going to happen. Then to get that far and be told that even if the baby makes it to term, it's not going to live for very long. We just sat there crying.

"After several minutes, we embraced each other and said we needed to pray. I didn't have the words. I said, 'Lord, we're heartbroken. We're devastated. But you've taught us a lot in what you've already brought us through, and we know you're good and we can trust you. We have no idea what this means, but we just pray that somehow, in some way, even in the midst of this tragedy, that you will be glorified.' I didn't know what else to pray for. That's all I could say."

And God answered their prayer. Jennifer and Mace were overwhelmed by the support they received and the opportunities for ministry that opened up to them. Throughout her pregnancy, Jennifer had just one wish. She wanted to hold her baby.

At 39 weeks, Jennifer delivered Hannah. She lived for 31 hours and 22 minutes – hours and minutes Jennifer, Mace and Bernard were able to hold her, kiss her and make short, but dear memories to last them a lifetime.

"It was amazing to see God answer our prayer for him to be glorified through such a tragic situation," Jennifer said. "Even the fact that she was born at 39 weeks, that she survived my entire pregnancy. She was born alive and breathing, and she was an absolute miracle in every single way. And even now, to this day,

we are able to look back and say, 'God, you were with us then.' And that promise he reminded me of time and time again is, 'I'm with you and you're not doing this alone.'"



Today, the Perez home is active. They continue to do foster care, a ministry that Bernard has also embraced. He welcomes foster children into the home, dotes on them and sings to them.

"We feel that this is a whole-family ministry and he is a part of that now," Mace said. "We've opened our home twice since Bernard was adopted and both times he's been a part of that decision. The blessing of it is that rather than being harmful, it's actually been very character-forming for him. He's seeing that this is what people who love Jesus do. We do radical things for Jesus and show love for others from hard places. It's been a beautiful thing."

Recently, the Perezes had three foster children living with them – energetic 4-year-old twins and a 6-year-old girl. Toys are often strewn across the floor, Play-Doh resides on mats on the table and the pet dog sits under the table hoping some lunch crumbs will drop to the floor. Sometimes, it could be described as crazy.

"We have a phrase that we like to use in our home," Jennifer said. "'We're going to embrace the crazy.' Anytime we feel the Lord tugging at our hearts while we're thinking, 'This is crazy,' we just lay it down and say, 'OK Lord. We're ready to embrace the crazy.'"

But no matter how crazy life gets, Hannah is never far from anyone's mind. Around her neck, Jennifer wears a necklace with Hannah's handprint imprinted on it and on the wall in the kitchen is a collage of photos and mementoes related to Hannah's birth. Even their foster children who never met Hannah, know that Auntie and Uncle (their nicknames for Jennifer and Mace) have a baby in heaven.

"It makes heaven more real for them," Jennifer said. "I'm thankful for that."

Through talking about Hannah, Jennifer and Mace have been able to have countless conversations not only with their foster children but with others in their community about the hope and trust they have in Jesus.

"We would never wish what we've been through on anyone," Mace said. "It sometimes still seems surreal that we've even been through that. But it's so amazing to see how when we're faithful and we lean on him, the Lord took this tiny little life, a little baby girl, who only lived for 31 hours and 22 minutes outside the womb, but literally touched thousands of lives." **BT**

What if the shocking becomes normal?

Story by
John Hall

Photography
by John Hall
and Mark
Sandlin

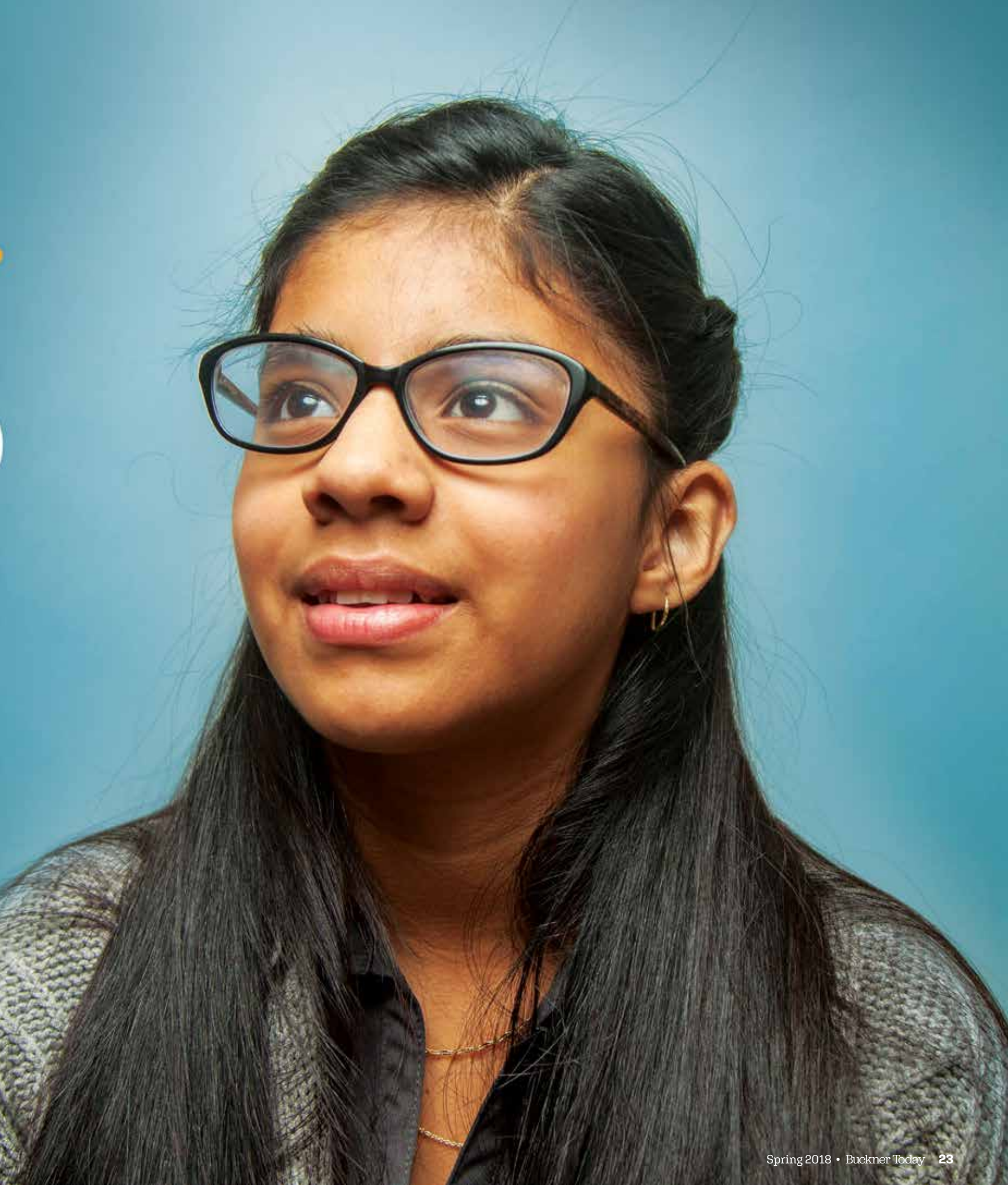
Normal is a funny word. It means something different to everyone. What's normal to you definitely isn't normal to someone else.

Living in a home is normal for some people; it isn't for 14-year-old Amanda Martinez.

Feeling safe when you walk out your front door might be normal to some. Amanda wishes she could imagine it.

And that's just it isn't it? Everything that is typical for a person now was once new – even unimaginable. But they experienced it, sometimes again and again, and it became normal.

That's what scares the staff of the Buckner Family Hope Center at Bachman Lake in Dallas. It drives them to shine hope into the lives of children and families there.



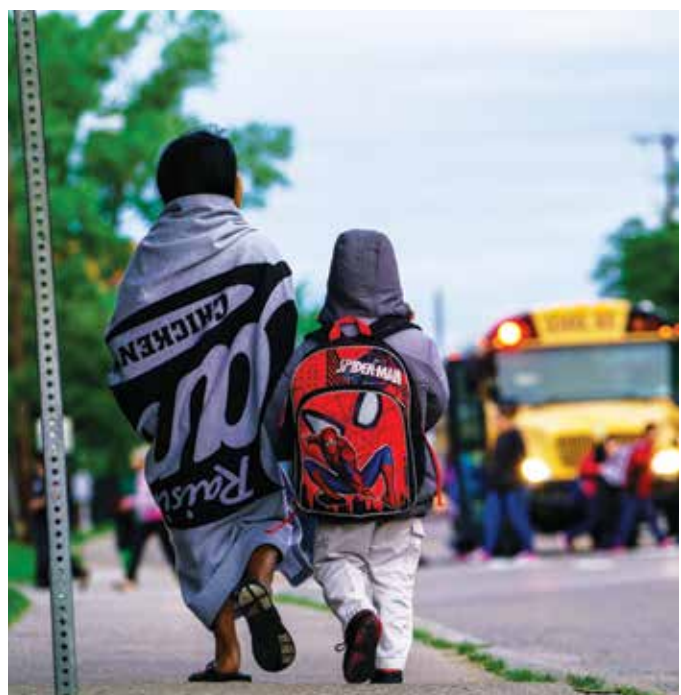


More than 82,000 people live in the 3-mile circle just north of Love Field in Dallas known as the Bachman Lake community. When the air traffic is busiest, planes fly across the area every two minutes and they're a regular occurrence throughout the day. Travellers come and go without noticing the area just before the landing strip.

Bachman Lake is home to more children under the age of 5 than any other area in the city, and many of them live either in poverty or under the constant threat of it. Fifty-seven percent of residents here have less than a high school education, limiting their job opportunities and earning power. The Child Protective Services removal rate is twice the Dallas County average.

Amanda knows the threats only too well. She sees them each time she walks out the door of the one-room apartment she shares with her parents and two siblings. In the parking lot, men loiter. Some sell drugs; others are drinking, no matter the time of day.

The situation doesn't get any better beyond her complex. Gang activity is common in the area. In the past three months, five shootings have taken place, including one that wounded a 9-year-old boy. At 4 p.m., young women can be found selling themselves



at a nearby gas station. Such activity only increases when the sun goes down.

"Unfortunately we have seen in this neighborhood young girls prostituting themselves," said Marcela Dominguez, youth and children specialist at the Family Hope Center. "It's sad because sometimes kids witness this and it's like, 'Is this OK?' My concern for Amanda is that she loses herself and gets sucked into the life this neighborhood is allowing them to see."

In this environment, it's easy for families to fail. The stress of poverty weighs heavily on them and affects parents' relationships with each other and with their children. Amanda's family nearly collapsed last year.

Serapio Martinez, Amanda's father – at that time the sole financial provider for the family – lost his job, leaving the family in financial shambles. The situation was so difficult the family considered returning to Mexico. Homelessness loomed over their heads.

"I felt scared because living on the streets is kind of dangerous," Amanda said.

That's when Amanda's mother, Marta Hernandez, discovered a new effort in the neighborhood.



In his first few months as director of the Family Hope Center at Bachman Lake, Ricardo Brambila was building relationships throughout the community, including families and school leaders. The concept and purpose of the Family Hope Center was new to the area, and he needed to introduce it to those who lived there.

He met with churches. He visited with groups in the area. Brambila attended as many school meetings as possible, where he could connect with the parents the center would eventually serve. He wanted to truly understand the needs of the community.

"In the Bachman Lake area, we have a tremendous amount of people. It is so dense a community that we have apartment complexes where we have families of seven living in one-bedroom apartments," Brambila said.

"All of our families have the same desire that all of us have: They want a better future for their children. They want a better future for themselves. But when poverty kicks in, it shackles their dreams. That is why Buckner is here – to make a change."

Buckner believes the best way to protect children is to strengthen families. Family Hope Centers are child-centered, family-focused places where families go to find hope, support and empowerment in their community to

"All of our families have the same desire that all of us have: They want a better future for their children. They want a better future for themselves. **But when poverty kicks in**, it shackles their dreams. That is why Buckner is here – to make a change."

–Ricardo Brambila, Director of the Buckner Family Hope Center at Bachman Lake



reach their fullest God-given potential. They engage through family assistance and community events; equip families through education, financial empowerment, child and youth development and spiritual development; elevate families through family coaching, counseling and spiritual enrichment.

"The Buckner Family Hope Center is interested in breaking generational and circumstantial poverty," Brambila said. "The way we do it is we start with the family, with mom and dad: How they model, how they deal with conflict, how they see themselves. We're helping families reconnect with God, reconnect with themselves, reconnect with their children."

Brambila started a parenting class in the auditorium of an area elementary school teaching parents how to connect and communicate with their family. Hernandez came hoping to learn how to build a better bond with her children.

"Buckner has helped me to be a better mom," Hernandez said. "I used to get very upset with my children if they didn't study. Now I have more patience and talk to them calmly. All the classes I've taken at Buckner have helped me. Buckner is hope to be able to get ahead. Buckner has helped us a lot."

The change was tangible.

"Buckner has changed my life because when my mom went to the classes for parents, before she didn't have patience, then the classes started to help her and she started to have more patience," Amanda said. "She gives us more hugs. She loves us more."

As Brambila became acquainted with Hernandez, he learned one of the reasons for her impatience was the stress weighing on her. Her husband and the family's sole financial provider, Martinez, recently had been laid off from his job of 17 years.

"The hardest time we've faced has been when my husband was let go, and he didn't have a job," Hernandez said. "I was depressed. I was losing hope and I thought that if he didn't find a job we would have to go back."

Martinez and Hernandez had started making piñatas and selling them through a broker to get by financially. Martinez would cut bamboo from a nearby river, and the couple would build the skeletons and cover them with colored paper for hours at a time.

Buckner staff members helped the couple create a business plan, learn how to market their piñatas and take advantage of larger opportunities to sell their products. As a result, the couple started making more than double what they were making before off each piñata.





The income helped the family get by until Martinez found another job and now the piñatas supplements Martinez's paycheck to build a down payment on a house. Amanda helps throughout the process. It's hard work, but it reinforces bonds between family members.

"My children helped," Hernandez said. "They say, 'Mom, that doesn't go like that, it goes like this' and together we shape it, so the piñata looks good. It is an art."

Amanda smiles as she reads a book while sitting on the higher of two bunk beds. She loves to learn and is passionate about learning. She's such an excellent student that she's in the early college program at Thomas Jefferson High School, where she'll earn an associate degree at the same time she receives her diploma.

From there, her future is as bright as her family is happy. She wants to be the first college graduate in her family, then become an elementary math teacher.

That's anything but normal.

"My dream for my future is going to college and graduating with a bachelor's degree in teaching," Amanda said. "I will be an example to my brothers to not give up on life." **BT**

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Why not me?

John Ramsey had devoted his entire life to serving the Lord. A former pastor who served 45 years in the ministry—27 overseas with the Southern Baptist Convention International Mission Board and 18 stateside—Ramsey had led countless people to Christ, bridged cultural boundaries and sacrificed comforts for the sake of the gospel. Still, after retiring to Buckner Westminster Place in Longview, Texas, he sensed his faith growing stale and felt a strong conviction to go deeper.

Story by Elizabeth Arnold

Photography by Russ Dilday and John Hall



"I felt that I really didn't love God as I should," Ramsey recalled with tears. "So I began to pray about it, and while praying remembered the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. I began to pray in more of those terms, that I would love God and love my neighbor."

At the time, Ramsey had no idea that 10 years later the prayer would lead him to a Vietnamese immigrant, a transplant center and, ultimately, death's door.

-//-

Cuong Manh Tran, a Southern Vietnamese naval officer and re-education camp survivor, escaped to the U.S. in 1979.

During the seven-day voyage from Vietnam to California, Tran surrendered his life to Christ. That commitment led him to Longview, Texas, where he was baptized alongside his family and later became pastor of Mobberly Baptist Church's small Vietnamese congregation.

Soon after taking the role of lead pastor, Tran's kidneys began failing. For the next 30 years, he would be in and out of medical appointments, on and off medication and eventually relying on 9-hour dialysis treatments each night.

"I wanted more and more people to know the Lord, so I kept working," Tran said. "I wanted to find the lost people and bring them back to God."

When Ramsey met Tran in 2012, Tran was still pastoring but losing strength daily. By 2016, he could no longer work, and doctors placed him on a kidney transplant list.

-//-

Ramsey remembers praying for Tran during a daily devotion.

"I was praying for Brother Tran, and it was as if the Lord said, 'What's wrong with your kidney? You give him yours.' And I just knew I had to do this."

Tran accepted the proposition, but struggled to comprehend his friend's decision.

"I couldn't imagine someone giving a part of their body to me," Tran said. "We had prayed for a kidney, but I thought it would come from someone who had already gone to be with the Lord. God had other plans for me, and he had other plans for John Ramsey — for us to be used for his glory."

The two began the six-month process to prepare for a transplant. Every two weeks, Ramsey made the trip to Tyler to see different doctors, have more tests and verify

the procedure was safe. Aware of the risks, Ramsey still never worried.

"I had the understanding that Lord would close the door if he needed to," he said.

-//-

The morning of the procedure dawned with hopeful certainty. Both surgeries ran smoothly. Tran's new kidney went to work just as a kidney should. Ramsey even went home early.

"Everything went well," remembers Tran. "Mr. John came by before he went home, and I was very happy to see him. In my mind, everything was good."

One week after the surgery, however, Ramsey developed serious stomach pains. Emergency room doctors diagnosed him with acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS), a rare condition from which only 2 percent of patients survive. Even after an emergency surgery, his body began to shut down. Family and friends prepared for the worst.

Tran, still recovering from his own surgery and under doctor's orders to stay home, was distraught. Helpless, he begged God for his friend's healing.

"I didn't know what to do except pray to God for a chance to see each other again, a chance to get on with our lives," Tran said.

Their prayers were answered, and two weeks later Ramsey was released from intensive care. He had to relearn everything from walking to swallowing during months of physical therapy, but his wife, Ann, said she knew this was all part of God's plan.

"God didn't want to just heal one man," she said with a tearful smile. "He wanted to heal two. He multiplied the miracle."

-//-

Today, both Ramsey and Tran are healthy. Tran is back working at the church occasionally. Ramsey is back enjoying resident activities at Westminster Place. They even spent Thanksgiving together.

"To me, he's more than a friend," Tran said. "Before this we were brothers in Christ, but now he's my brother in life by blood too."

As the two pastors sat inside the simple double-wide trailer that is the Vietnamese church and shared their story, a red banner with gold-threaded Vietnamese lettering stood behind them.

The words on the banner? "From morning to night, we remember what the Lord gives us." **BT**





How to **love your parents** as they age

By Charlie Wilson, Senior Vice President, Buckner Retirement Services

Aging parents. It's a life stage we always know will come, but never really know what it will look like or how to prepare.

The Bible calls us to honor our parents, but the command isn't just for children under 18. God intends us to honor, love and serve our parents throughout our lives and theirs. Though the demands of life change as our parents age, the command to love them does not.

As a senior living provider, Buckner staff spend significant time around parents and their children. Here are seven ways we've seen to best love aging parents.

1. Make time.

As adults, we lead busy, fast-paced lives. So fast, in fact, that it can sometimes be easy to forget our parents. But there will come a time when you'll wish you had spent as much time with them as you could. It doesn't have to be fancy, just a few minutes to show you care. Take the Sunday afternoon to go visit. Deliver flowers on Valentine's Day. Make the phone call just because. You'll be glad you did.

2. Listen.

Intentionally ask your parents about the things they've seen and done in their lives. Enjoy the stories ... even if you've heard them 51 times. Showing interest will make them feel seen and valued. Take every opportunity to learn things about them — and from them — while you can.

3. Ask the hard questions.

Aging parents will often be reluctant to admit loneliness, changing health and fears about aging. Ignoring these issues, though, would be unloving. Ask your parents how they're really doing. Having these regular check-in conversations now lays the foundation for harder conversations in the future.

4. Be willing to serve, but also willing to be served.

It may sound obvious, but your parents will always be your parents. They're going to want to cook you dinner, babysit your children and bring you soup when you're sick. Let them do this. They're not fragile, and you're not invincible. Honor their independence while it lasts and love them by letting them love you the best ways they know how.

5. Get involved in their lives.

Much like it's important to know about your parents' history, it's equally important to know about their daily lives. Get involved

with their day-to-day. Go to doctor appointments with them. They'll want someone else there. Does your parent have a bucket list? Help them check some items off the list. You'll have just as much fun as they will.

6. Give them the respect they've earned.

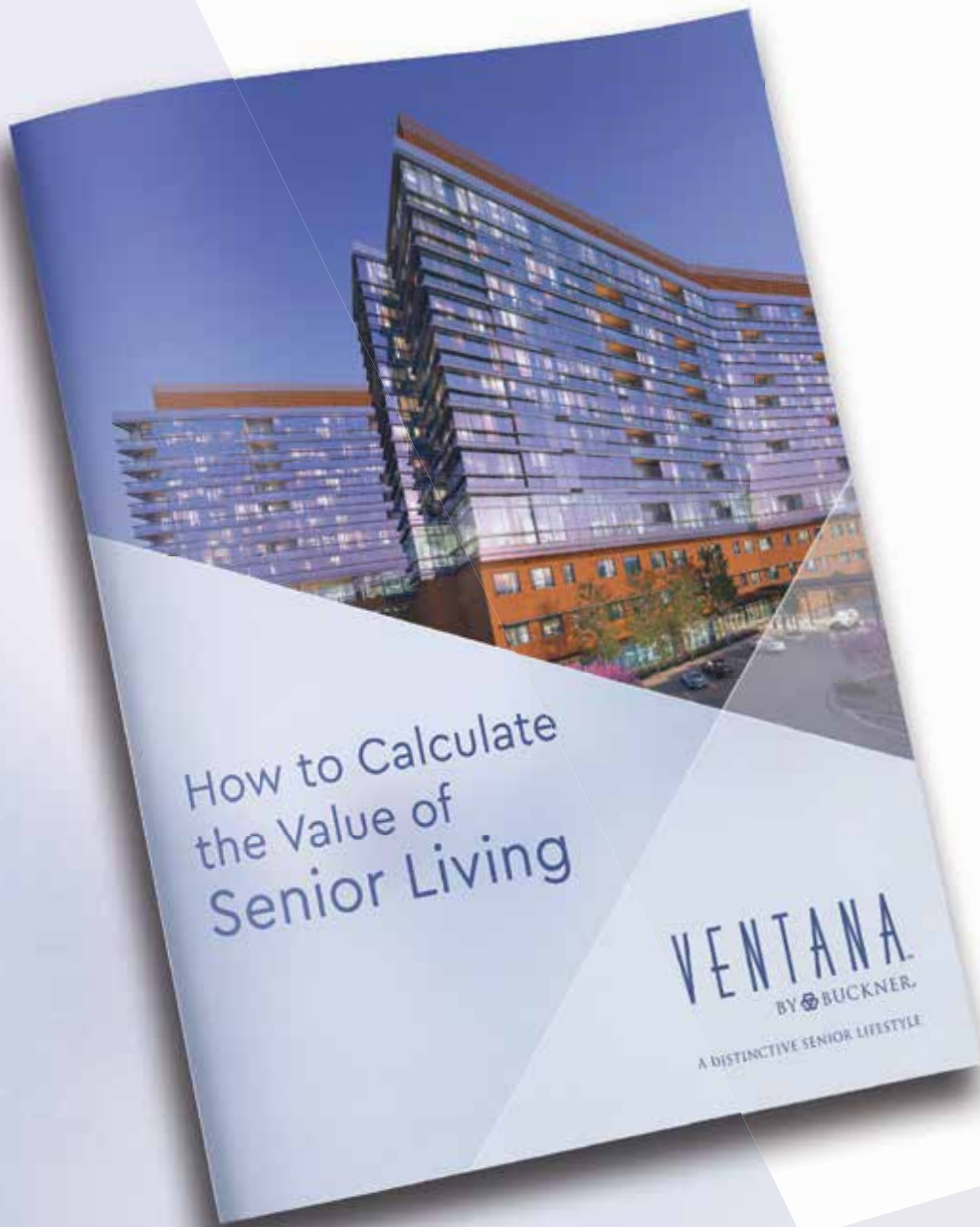
Let's face it, your parents have earned respect through the years. They've invested time, resources and emotional energy to help build the life you have today. Honor the things they've done. Show them respect by still asking for their advice and regularly thanking them for what they've given you.

7. Show patience.

There will be things, like technology, that you'll understand better than your parents. Be patient with their questions, frequent phone calls and frustration. Remember you were there once too, when they taught you addition and subtraction, how to tie your shoes and recite the ABCs. They might not ever understand what you're trying to teach them, but at least they'll know you care.

Bottom line, having aging parents is going to take courage. It's going to take sacrifice and patience and a willingness to understand. But aren't these the same things they needed when raising you?





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Embracing community: How tragedy brought one family a community to rely on

by Aimee Freston

The first time Librada Cortez Martinez stepped into the Buckner Family Hope Center in Oaxaca, Mexico, she thought only about her children.

Martinez had seen the impact the Family Hope Center was having on the children in her community. Children were benefitting from the classes and activities, and she wanted her teenage daughters to be involved. She never imagined the Family Hope Center would become such an important resource for her entire family.



Martinez's daughters started taking classes at the Family Hope Center, but she learned she could also participate in classes. She took her first class – learning how to make baskets and vases out of paper mache – then she took another class and another. Before she knew it, Martinez and her family were immersed in their new community.

At the Family Hope Center, Martinez and her family received shoes and school supplies, they participated in health campaigns and received parent education. The Family Hope Center became an extension of their home – a second family.

"What I enjoy the most at Buckner is the camaraderie among all the people that attend the center," Martinez said. "We all get together for the workshops and we have a great sense of community."

The support of the Family Hope Center became even more

valuable when a year later, Martinez's husband, Florentino Hernandez Pacheco, was involved in a motorcycle accident and was in a coma. Pregnant with her third daughter, Martinez was scared.

"I was very afraid and sad," Martinez said. "I was afraid of losing him, and my daughters cried constantly for their father."

Martinez knew that without her husband, their family would suffer financially and emotionally. Staff from the Family Hope Center stayed with their family. They provided emotional support and provided them with assistance while Pacheco was in the hospital.

Pacheco awoke from his coma after 18 days and was able to fully recover with no lasting effects from the injury.

"Thank God my husband is now OK, and we are all healthy," Martinez said. "He is now able to work and he works in a building materials supply store."

Martinez embraced the Family Hope Center even more than she did before. The couple began the family coaching program that helped them identify financial, emotional and spiritual goals for their family. She took classes in cooking and crafts and began supplementing their income by selling the products she learned how to make at the classes.

"Before coming to the center, I used to spend my time at home," Martinez said. "I didn't socialize much. I didn't know a lot of people in the community because I would just spend my days at home. Now it is different. What I learned from the classes, I put it into practice and Buckner has helped me improve our family finances."

Now six years later, Martinez is a leader in her community. She is one of the most active volunteers at the Family Hope Center and she teaches some of the cooking classes to other women at the Family Hope Center.

"I enjoy volunteering at the Family Hope Center because I like to support other ladies like me and teach them what I know," Martinez said.

The Family Hope Center has also allowed Martinez's daughters to hope. They play soccer, help their mother in the garden and are excelling in their studies. Her oldest daughter was recently awarded a scholarship and as she draws in her notebook, she dreams about her future.

And every Sunday, the family makes sure to carve a bit of time to do something together. Often, they go to a park to eat a picnic lunch, play games and talk.

"Buckner has helped me in many ways," Martinez said. "And my family has benefitted. At Buckner, I feel good." **BT**

Joy!

This issue of Buckner Today has been filled with people who live with joy, so it's only appropriate we leave you with this photo of a young Texas Rangers fan. Children could not contain their excitement to meet players from the Rangers at the Linda and Ken Hall Buckner Family Hope Center in Longview during the Rangers Winter Caravan.

Children poured into the center after school to meet catcher Robinson Chirinos (below), pitcher Nick Gardewine, first base coach Steve Buechele and radio personality Jared Sandler. As the Rangers signed autographs and posed for photos, children grinned with their friends, clapped their hands in excitement and laughed joyously while meeting their baseball heroes.



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